JOKING AT THE OFFICE: COFFEE-BREAK HUMOR

Catherine Swanson
Indiana University

In the small but growing literature of what is called "occupational folklore," special, generally blue-collar groups have attracted the most attention.[1] This is not surprising in light of the vivid way in which certain groups assert their identity or become identified with goals and ideals. Consider, for example, the image of the cowboy--the rugged outdoorsman, self-sufficient and hard-working.[2] The "lore" of such groups as cowboys, miners and truck drivers constitutes bodies of material that express the nature of the group, of the work, or of the experience and does so in a direct way as John Hughes sang for me in 1975:

> Trucks roll along
> Their weary, lonesome way,
> Taking me to the coffee stop
> Where someone waits for me.[3]

In the following paper, I wish to discuss a group that does not have a solid, homogeneous occupational identity. Indeed, although they work together, they do not have the same job. I will discuss the response of two members of this group to a work-induced conflict, the resolutions of which they found in the form of competitive joking during coffee-breaks.

In the course of an average working day, transactions between faculty, students, and staff take place in the undergraduate office of a large university academic department. These transactions, most of them bureaucratic in nature, provide the routine of a particular work situation. Occasionally, while seated in the lounge area of the office, a student and instructor will have a "serious discussion" about material covered in class or about particular research. On the other hand, interaction of another sort occurs, conspicuous in its structure and apparent lack of connection with the work performed in the office. It is obviously not work, but recreation. Spontaneously a group gathers, work stops, and people engage in conversational play characterized by the use of jokes, puns, limericks, humorous riddles, and what have been called "joking expressions"--certain kinds of humor which, while not as formalized as jokes, contain appealing or appropriate characteristics that allow for their re-use on several occasions.[4] Below is an example of a joking expression used in this situation. It is obviously usable in a variety of situations:

> B: I would love to get an old Mercedes that has about five more miles on it and costs about ten dollars and then run it into a tree--safely run it into a tree--and then when everybody, the cop and everybody, says, "Oh my God, your Mercedes!" I'd say, "That's the way Mercedes Benz!" . . . . All of life is a practical joke, anyway, so you might as well set 'em up.[5]

These moments, when work is suspended in favor of artistic and humorous conversation, provided the basis of fieldwork which I conducted as a participant-observer for three months. To my delight, I was immediately ushered into group interaction and told that in order to be properly "initiated," I must listen to Bob's favorite jokes. Bob's reputation as a jokester had already attracted my attention; however, I was to discover that by participating in these joking sessions, I had joined a group whose breaktime behavior differed significantly from general office transactions. Although subsequent circumstance eventually dissipated this particular kind of collective articulation, group interaction was at its cohesively humorous high point during my fieldwork. Members of the group--those who routinely chose to take breaks and tell jokes together--included Lynn, the office secretary; Bob, Daniel, and Peter, graduate students; Andy, an undergraduate; and me.

Jokes were introduced during breaks in a straightforward manner with an announcement ("That reminds me of the one . . .") or a request ("Want to hear my new limerick?") and generally came in the midst of light conversation. Sometimes the announcement signaled

not only the joke but the beginning of the break as well. Other cues were much more subtle: Bob or George flopping on the sofa and making a wisecrack; Lynn waving someone in from the hallway; the arrival of morning doughnuts and coffee. Rarely did one pronounce, "It's breaktime."

Spatial characteristics of the office definitely contributed to setting a stage that took its actors out of the realm of their working environments. The large, comfortable room encouraged movement. During the more animated segments of conversation or jokes, people changed positions quite often, moving from sofa to chair to standing. Those left without a seat paced about or leaned against the filing cabinets. Sometimes general conversation was accompanied by playful cuffs or jostling around.

This kind of verbal/kinesic conversation was called "fooling around" by my informants and was an observable distinction between working and taking a break. I did not tape record each break, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that the group integrated the presence of my tape recorder quite well into their word play:

B: (Points to tape recorder) I wasn't talking to that thing.
D: What is that? A radio or . . .
B & L: (Together) A tape recorder.
D: Oh, right . . .
B: You see, she's studying to be President of the United States. (Laughter)
B: She hasn't got down the subtely of it yet, though--Nixon didn't say, "Wait a minute, Bob."
D: Speak in here . . . .
B: Yeah, will you speak into this rose?[6] (Laughter)

While joking expressions occurred during all breaks, jokes themselves appeared less frequently, and normally as a trade-off between two or three participants. As the rest waited for the punch line, the narrator presented an uninterrupted joke or anecdote. In the following example, conversation has halted while the joke is completed:

G: And then there is the other one--it's about this guy named Cohen. Cohen retires and goes to Miami Beach. And he's rather shy--introverted guy--lonely. He isn't having fun, and he doesn't have much of a social life, or anything like that. So he looks around and he sees Goldberg having fun, girls all around, the life of the party, going out to the dog races, the jai alai every night. So one day, Cohen screws up his courage, goes over to Goldberg and says:

"Tell me, why are you so popular? What can I do to get popular? I gotta know."

Goldberg doesn't think much of him, so he looks at him and blurts out:

"This is what you do. You get a camel and ride it up and down Collins Avenue every day. And you'll become very popular."

Cohen doesn't realize that he's just giving this to him, so he says:

"O. K., I'll do it."

And he leaves--and it just so happens that the circus is down around Florida and having a sale. They have to get rid of some of the stuff, and he buys a camel. Well, for a couple of days, he rides the camel up and down Collins Avenue. And one day he parks the camel . . . ties it up and goes in, has lunch, comes out and the camel's gone. Calls up the police:

"My camel's been stolen."

They say, "Your what?"

"I have a camel, and the camel's been stolen."

The guy says, "O. K., calm down. I want a description. What color is it?"

"What color is it? It's camel color." (Laughter)

"All right, all right. What sex is it?"

"What sex is it? How do I know? I never looked . . . . O. K., I know,

it's a male."

"How do you know it's a male? You just told me you didn't know what sex it is."

"Well, I just remembered. Everyday, as I ride up and down Collins Avenue, I hear people exclaim, 'Look at the schmuck on the camel.'"[7]

In the preceding segment, Bob had risen to leave as George announced his joke, but remained instead to listen and eventually announced his own:

B: I've never heard that one before.
G: That's a good joke, a really good joke.
B: I shouldn't have sat down again--I have a camel joke.
L & C: (Together) Let's hear <u>your</u> camel joke.[8]

On the whole, once joking had been initiated in a break, jokes served to inspire more jokes in versions of "That's nothing, wait'll you hear this one."

As easily as they would gather, participants would leave to go back to work. Breaks had no predetermined length but instead were subject to termination by an implicit group decision.

Why should a folklorist interested in the folklore of working choose to study precisely those situations in which no one is working? The answer lies in the fact that what appears to be a suspension of the work environment is only that--an intermission--and is bounded on both sides by work. By definition, it is a "break," a period of deliberate contrast to work.

The idea of the "coffee break" is not new to anyone in the working world. Often it has institutional sanction, as in this case in which university employees are told that they may take one rest period for every four hours of work. Sometimes the break is a very structured affair and at other times it is structurally amorphous. At the very least it provides a period of time in which the work routine is halted.

Even as breaks are defined by the working situation, they are also limited by the working environment. They must often be taken within the workers' physical working space. Sometimes workers are able to exercise great control over their break activities; in many cases, however, choosing a topic of conversation is the only creative choice available. In any event, as long as some control of activity remains in the workers' hands, they are free to draw creatively on their reservoir of responses. Not every break response is folklore, except in a circuitous way; however, some, like the ones I observed, allow the opportunity to explore a range of responses, including those of obvious folkloristic importance.

In spite of the fact that frequency and duration of these breaks were subject to the tone of the day, they occurred by consensus and only when the "time was right." A day rarely went by without a break; indeed, the absence of one would have been noticed and most of the structure of what occurred was determined by implicit agreement.

One day during a break, I mentioned the fact that I had noticed a difference between break activities among this group and break activities among other informal groups in the department. The group agreed that a difference could be observed and, attributing much of it to the specialness of their situation, were of the opinion that others would want to join if they could.[9] Lynn, the secretary, told me:

> Eventually, people will know that if they can't find you, they can come down here and find you . . . we've got the sofa, these chairs, the windows . . . also we encourage it (joking). It's relaxed, the atmosphere is different than other offices in this building. It's a good place for jokes.[10]

So far I have been describing the informal process of taking a break as it pertains to a particular group of people who work together. To omit a discussion of the work which is

done when breaks are not being taken would be to ignore the contrast by which I have defined a break.

Sometimes, say in processes of mass production or in smaller collective efforts, workers are simultaneously engaged in roughly the same kinds of tasks. We say they have the same job. In other situations, workers perform dissimilar tasks simultaneously and are united at the level of a common objective, say making money or working for a cause. These workers do not necessarily have the same job, although they may share an occupational identity. In an academic department not everyone has the same job; some are clerical workers, some administrative assistants, some librarians, instructors, or students.

It would be misleading to imply that breaks were social and that work was something else. Doing one's job includes accommodation to a specific working relationship--colleague, employer/employee, teacher/student--which in turn implies the expectations of a social role. The difference between doing one's job and taking a break (working and playing) lies in the social dynamic which operates in each case to integrate role expectation and experience.

Folklorist Elizabeth Mathias, in her research on the games of a group of Italian immigrant men in an American urban setting, describes recreative behavior as public behavior which helps a group give meaning to its situation. It allows members of the group to cross-reference group boundaries. Then, as expressive behavior is generated, it becomes the focal point of an emergent group, and finally, as it did in this case, becomes the means by which new immigrants become comfortable in their setting and the old retreat from assimilation. [11]

In terms of an integrative function, recreative behavior in an occupational setting may also give meaning to a specific situation for a group. In particular, joking becomes the collective generated expression that makes sense of the working situation. Reference has already been made by others to the ways in which humor may be used to achieve integration. It may occur during public ritual to illustrate social disorder and reaffirm social order;[12] or it may occur as part of on-the-job interaction in order to maintain a necessary working relationship; or it may--as it does in my case study--provide the opportunity to resolve what can't be resolved while working: a built-in occupational conflict between Bob's role as student and George's role as instructor.[13]

Before discussing that conflict, however, I wish to look at the way in which anthropologist F. M. Keesing has described recreative behavior. He sees it as a free zone which has a frame of reference different from everyday routine.[14] This state is achieved by suspending the usual rules and substituting other rules which allow recreative behavior to occur. I found that I could not overlook the similarity with which Keesing sees recreative behavior in relation to culture change, and the way in which I see recreative behavior (joke-telling during breaks) in relation to working. In addition, if we agree with Roger Abrahams' classification of joking as a "play genre"[15] which "allows for the cathartic response to the activity--the simultaneous identification and distancing"[16]--then at the very least we must recognize that breaks have the potential for providing the opportunity to establish psychic distance from work and at the same time for providing the mechanisms for dealing with work-related issues, especially when joke-telling occurs.

Bob, a graduate student, and George, a faculty member, often engage in competitive joke-telling on breaks. At other times, however, they must work in an atmosphere which at once encourages and denies the competitive element in the relationship between their roles. Although a certain amount of ambition is required for both graduate students and instructors, it is simply considered poor taste for a graduate student to assert directly, "I think I can do your job better than you can."

Joke-telling sessions, on the other hand, provide a different frame of reference for the two by allowing them to temporarily be outside their status relationship and compete directly as joke-tellers. As a matter of fact, during most of the breaks which I observed,

the verbal action occurred between Bob and George. Clearly, when telling jokes, they acknowledged the situation indirectly:

G: (Concluding a joke) . . . it's a great line for certain situations; it's a punch line and it fits.

B: . . . and then there was one . . .

(Giggles from L and C)

B: (To L and C) I told you . . . this is the type of joke George would like.[17]

If the break was an extended one in which joke-telling grew from a casual conversation and lasted for awhile, Bob and George traded jokes while the rest became a participating audience whose contributions occasionally interrupted their performance.

Bob's reputation as the master wit of the group had preceded our meeting. It was not surprising to me, then, that his repertoire of jokes and joking expressions provided the bulk of breaktime humor. I asked Bob how he was able to remember so many jokes and he replied:

> I've just categorized it by type. So if somebody starts talking about trees and I'm in the right mood, I can go for forty minutes of tree jokes, tree puns. It's just that type of thing . . . subject classification.[18]

George's reaction to Bob's reputation and to his ability to remember many jokes was an attempt to find jokes which Bob had not heard. On one occasion, he made the following preface to a joke:

> Here's one you couldn't have heard because I made it up.[19]

George's corpus of jokes was also large; however, group opinion had not confirmed his position as it had Bob's. Consequently, George asserted himself boastfully in the course of his joke-telling:

> I mean I have lots of different jokes, depending on the situation--when you say, "What's your favorite joke?" I got millions of jokes--hundreds of thousands of jokes.[20]

Responding to George's claims of memory, Bob made his own claims in the prefatory intensifiers of his own jokes:

> That reminds me of my favorite sick joke--oh, this is sick. It's even sicker than that. It's a Karen Ann Quinlan joke. (To George) Have you heard any Karen Ann Quinlan jokes? She left a wake-up call for August![21]

I have been discussing the competitive use of jokes to resolve an occupationally-defined ambiguity between the roles of Bob and George. By going on the line with their joke material, they set up a situation in which one or the other may consider himself to be the better joke-teller. Whether or not this contest can ever be won (for example, Bob's reputation seemed to be fairly solid), the ability to compete openly provides relief from the ongoing conflict in roles. Because breaks receive some bureaucratic support, and because the rest of the group felt comfortable as the participating audience to a two-man show, Bob and George had many opportunities to compete in this fashion.

After my fieldwork had been completed, circumstance changed the structure of the group. Lynn (who had been a particularly appreciative audience to the competitive joking of Bob and George) left to take another job in a neighboring state and her departure signaled a change in joking, the frequency of which diminished significantly. Bob and George still engage in humorous rivalry, but until they are provided with (or can provide themselves with) a situation on which they can compete in a socially approved way, their rivalry may be less dramatic than that which I witnessed.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Mody Boatright, Folklore of the Oil Industry (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963); George Korson, Coal Dust on the Fiddle (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1943); amd Richard M. Dorson, "The Folklore of Economic Occupations,"

in America in Legend (New York: Pantheon, 1973), pp. 127-250. A recent dissertation on the subject was completed by Bruce Nickerson, entitled "Industrial Folklore" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1976).

2. Dorson, "Folklore of Economic Occupations."

3. Recorded July 1975, Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, Washington, D.C.

4. Frank Hall, "Conversational Joking: A Look at Applied Humor," in Folklore Annual 6 (1974). ed. John McDowell (Austin: Center for Intercultural Studies in Folklore and Oral History):26.

5. Transcript of recorded conversation, 17 June 1977.

6. Transcript, 6 June 1977.

7. Transcript, 6 June 1977.

8. Transcript, 6 June 1977.

9. Transcript, 19 July 1977.

10. Transcript, 2 June 1977 and 15 July 1977.

11. Elizabeth Mathias, "The Game as Creator of the Group in an Italian-American Community," Pennsylvania Folklife 23 (Summer, 1974):22-30.

12. Victoria R. Bricker, Ritual Humor of the Highland Chiapas (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973).

13. James Spradley and Brenda J. Mann, The Cocktail Waitress (New York: Wiley, 1975). See also A. J. M. Sykes, "Joking Relationships in an Industrial Setting," American Anthropologist 68 (1966):188-193.

14. F. M. Keesing, "Recreative Behavior and Culture Change," in Men and Cultures, ed. A. F. C. Wallace (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960).

15. Roger Abrahams, "The Complex Relations of Simple Forms," Genre 2 (1969):112.

16. Abrahams, "Complex Relations," p. 115.

17. Transcript, 7 June 1977.

18. Transcript, 19 May 1977.

19. Transcript, 7 June 1977.

20. Transcript, 5 June 1977.

21. Transcript, 15 July 1977.